

No Textual Matter: Editors and Publishers of Early Colonial Spanish American Narrative (1493–1524)

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Abstract: Focused on a narrow idea of production that dismissed reception, critics and literary historians searched the origins of Spanish-American literature within authorial margins and the limits of the modern notion of the text. By neglecting the roles played by contemporary editors and publishers, not only have they missed the instrumental elements of book production, but ignored their mediating role with those who made literature possible: contemporary readers. This essay poses an alternative interpretation of the origins of Spanish American narrative by vindicating the materiality of the book, and of those behind it, and thus revisits the definition of literature outside the conventional margins of the text.

Keywords: Early Modern, Publishing, Spanish America, Spain, Literature, Authorship, Readership

IN APRIL OF 1493, a small book, or booklet, of two leaves or four pages containing Christopher Columbus' letter to Luis de Santángel, the Spanish crown's official scribe, was published in Barcelona by Pedro Posa, only a month after the admiral had returned from his first trip to the West Indies. Thirteen other editions of this printed letter followed in Spanish, Latin and Italian the same year, and two more in Italian and in German in 1495. Labeled already in 1939 as *Americanum Number One*, this letter has rarely been referred to as a book nor considered the inaugural text in manuals of literary history of Latin America. Instead, Columbus' diary, published three hundred years later than Pedro Posa's edition and dubiously authored by Columbus himself, counts as the earliest European account of the Americas (in Mignolo 1998 [1982] 60).

Rather than attributing such misplacement to a concern that the diary may have been undertaken before the letter, I suspect this oversight is simply due to a void in research linking the work of book publishers and editors with the beginning of early modern Spanish American narrative. While publishers have been overlooked in "text" production, editors have also been unnoticed both in text production and text reception, first as text evaluators and secondly as designated first readers. The reliance on the concept of the text as an authorial device, independent from its first nature as a book, explains this exclusion while it illustrates the contradictions and limits of an interpretive model still rooted in post-structuralism. Similarly, when in an effort to recreate historical accuracy, critics categorized Cortés' 1522 letter from the recently conquered Mexican capital Tenochtitlan to king Charles of Spain as private document, not a text, they ignored the fact that it had been published extensively as a book in seven different languages throughout Europe and even read, in 1524, as literature by contemporary Italian readers.

Generic words such as "text" and "literature" have been rarely revisited in the last two decades in Spanish Colonial studies due to an exhaustion caused in part by the exclusion of the book. In 2006, I thought that the absence of bibliography in Colonial Latin American

Studies had to do with the fact that there were more pressing matters to attend, namely Cultural Studies and the Subaltern in Spanish Colonial Studies (Barrau 7). But as these matters have continued circling around the community of scholars' "ethical responsibility" towards others or, as Bruno Bosteels put it, a thirty year old "ethical superstition" in Latin American Studies (Bosteels 2007; 11–23), a parenthetical turn toward bibliography might still turn productive, especially in the face of a recent climate where ethics is merely a disguise in political discussions. When the January 2006 *Publication of the Modern Language Association* (PMLA) addressed a void in literary studies and announced a "new turn" toward the study of "material media" that will pay closer attention to bibliography, paleography, and editing, these disciplines were part of what some skeptics called the "New Boredom" (David Scott Kastan in Leah Price 2006; 10), doubting that book studies would ever be groundbreaking. Groundbreaking or not, old book editions are as unaccounted for in Spanish Colonial Studies as they can be revealing when studying early modern European popular culture, including the characterization that editorial marginalia made of West Indian Others since Columbus' first book was published.

Before Walter Mignolo's "Letters, Chronicles and Reports of Discovery and Conquest" was published as chapter two of volume one in a notorious history of Spanish American literature (Madrigal ed. 1998 [1982]) to separate these works from the corpus Colonial Spanish American literature, literary critics had been noticeably influenced by Hayden White's reflections (1970s) on the literary nature of historiography. Titles such as "The Fictions of Factual Representation" (White 1976) echoed in Beatriz Pastor's *The Armature of Conquest* (1992 [1983]) as the author exposed narratives of discovery as manipulatively fictional. Spanish colonial distortions of the Americas was in Pastor's view a process of fictionalization driven by economic, not literary intentions that started with Columbus's "instrumentalization of reality" inspired by Marco Polo's part real and part mythical portrayal of the Indies (37). Interpretations like Pastor's became very attractive to readers of the 1970s and 1980s who re-read early Spanish American accounts as exploitive lies, not unlike the way nineteenth-century historiography had been scrutinized for using narrative artifacts detached from the "experimental or observational controls" that makes history a reliable discipline (White 82).

But by 1988, Rolena Adorno announced that transplanting Hayden White's studies on nineteenth century historiography into early modern Spanish Colonial Studies had been a mistake. "Too many among us," acknowledged Adorno, "have tried to answer the question of the literary, or otherwise historiographical nature of [the first Spanish American narratives] quoting Hayden White," despite the fact that "the historiography of the nineteenth century world he analyzed had nothing to do with the Spanish chronicles of the Indies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (16). Adorno's reaction against the search for Latin American literary origins in conventional Western aesthetic terms represented a "new paradigm" in Spanish Colonial Studies that sought the substitution of the narrow concept "literature" by the multi-cultural "discourse," and opened the door to "synchronic cultural practices" (11). In their avoidance of the Euro-centric and anachronistic mistakes of the past, new studies were at odds with the tradition that Alfonso Reyes and Pedro Henríquez Ureña started decades earlier while looking for signs of literary vocation among Spanish explorers and conquerors. Given that "literariness" could not describe the works of men whose intentions were not literary, or who did not even intended to write at all (Mignolo 59), the attention switched from modern reader-response interpretive models to early modern discourse-production classifications. Mignolo's tripartite classification "Letters, Chronicles and Reports of Dis-

covery and Conquest” included “discursive types,” not “texts,” because while texts are “verbal acts that are preserved in society’s collective memory because they are highly significant for that culture” (57), discursive types did not enter the textual domain until rescued and incorporated in modern times. Thus, if today some “letters” are considered “texts,” argued Mignolo, it is because our society has rescued them from the past and given them, from the perspective of modern theories of reception, a cultural significance they did not have at the time they were produced (59).

Ironically, it is in this search for synchronic authenticity with twentieth-century tools that the “new paradigm” in Spanish Colonial Studies failed to acknowledge that letters by explorers and conquerors were in fact already “highly significant” in their target culture at the time of their production, either as “texts,” as one could only anachronistically imagine, or as “books,” as synchronic evidence shows. The proof that Columbus’s *Letter* to Santángel entered the group of “verbal acts preserved in society’s collective memory” is its quick publication in April 1493 and subsequent reception five months later. This would come in a letter by the Spanish Crown celebrating Columbus’ book, not letter, and “the greatness of an enterprise which no born man could imagine” (Jiménez de la Espada in Mignolo 71). Not only did Mignolo’s reference to the Crown’s letter undermine his own typological classification, but it also revealed two cultural practices that the scholars of the “new paradigm” ignored inexplicably, contemporary publishing and reading. While the latter disregarded the literary reception theories that were current in the 1980s (Wolfgang Iser and Hans Jauss), the former ignored the fact that once published, its inclusion in the corpus of “highly significant verbal acts that are preserved in society’s collective memory” was a *fait accompli*. Moreover, Mignolo’s “early modern typology” is based on 19th century classifications (Jiménez de la Espada) that may not reflect 16th century publishing/reading practices.

The sixth book edition of Columbus’ letter came also in 1493 in an elegant and illustrated ten-leaf pictorial Latin version by Bergmann de Olpe, who published it at Basle under the title “The Discovered Islands,” with a prologue that read: “Letter of Christopher Columbus, to whom our age owes much...sent under the auspices and at the cost of the most invincible Ferdinand, king of Spain. Addresses to the magnificent lord Raphael Sanxis (Gabriel Sánchez), treasurer of the same illustrious king...” (Columbus 1). The illustrations in Olpe’s edition were most likely inspired by Columbus’s own drawings and based on direct observations, thus becoming the earliest known European representation of the West Indies and their inhabitants. That several multilingual reprints of the initial Columbus letter followed so quickly and within less than a year indicates that the work of the admiral, “to whom [his] age [owed] much,” had not gone unacknowledged.

Another example of contemporary reception that involves significant books dealing with noteworthy events, and royal readers, is the equally un-acknowledged and curiously literary Italian version of Hernán Cortés’ 1520 *Letter* to King Charles V of Spain printed in the print shop of Venetian publisher Bernardino de Viano de Lexona Vercellese on August 20th of 1524. Contrary to the opinion of scholars within the “new paradigm” in Spanish Colonial Studies, “literariness” is not an anachronistic attribute forced by twentieth-century poetics or by critics who, like Reyes and Henríquez Ureña, wished to find literary vocations among explorers and conquerors. Rather, the signs of literariness can appear synchronically to the diffusion of the book and within its margins; for example, first as the original letter is shaped into its first edition with a prologue and an epilogue addressed to any curious consumer of action adventures, and secondly in subsequent editions whose prologues either expect, direct,

or reflect a given reaction among readers who consume a popular literary genre. In November 8th of 1522, publisher Jacob Cromberger edited and printed the first book edition of Hernán Cortés' 1520 letter from Mexico, revealing the existence of Moctezuma's domains in a long title that served as prologue describing:

the lands and provinces without number that he has newly discovered... And in particular... a very large and very rich province called Culúa, in which there are large cities and *marvelous*¹ buildings, much commerce and great wealth. Among these cities there is one more *marvelous* and more wealthy than all the others, called Temixtitan, which has, with extraordinary [*marvelous* in original] skill, built upon a great lake, of which city and province a powerful lord called Mutezuma is king... here things terrible to relate [*hear* in the original] befell the captain and the Spaniards (Cortés 2001, 47).

This prologue not only framed this letter as a book of travel and adventure by entertaining while educating readers about the new magnitude of the growing Spanish empire, it also invited a thematic connection with popular story-telling about the deeds of Christian knights in strange lands, either real or imaginary, driven by what was then believed to be "noble" causes. The most popular genre in secular literature of the time period was chivalric novels, a genre which offered a thematic link with the adventures in remote places that Cromberger describes as "marvelous." In addition to advancing the news on the newly discovered "lands and provinces" in the New World, publisher and editor Jacob Cromberger promised telling shocking events in the title, "here things terrible to hear befell the captain and the Spaniards," and military deeds of unprecedented proportions in the epilogue:

Of how the Spaniards had taken by storm the great city of Temixtitan, in which there had died more Indians than Jews in Jerusalem during the destruction of that city by Vespasian and, even so, there were more people in it than in the holy city... These are great and *marvelous* things and it is without doubt another world, which we who live beyond are most envious to see. This news is all that we here have for certain up to the beginning of April 1522 (Cortés 2001, 159).

This epilogue described war in a classic heroic fashion, in distant and strange lands that were "without doubt another world" where "great and strange things" happened, but it also communicated the immediacy and the familiarity of modern newsprints: the events had occurred only seven months earlier, they involved the readers' countrymen, and they invited a continuation of the events in a future "installment." This would come with Cromberger's 1523 book edition of Cortés' next letter, where the news of "...how Spaniards had taken by storm of the great city of Temixtitan" was narrated in full length.

The editorial step that launched Cortés' 1520 letter to Italian readership as literary was the book edition of Bernardino de Viano de Lexona Vercellese. It included seventy-three numbered sheets and a map of Tenochtitlan, and a long title announcing "many things worth the admiration" (*molte cose degne di scienza, & admiratione*), and the promise of "enormous delight and pleasure" (*dilettatione & piacere grandissimo*). Based on a previous Latin edition that Nicolo Laburnio translated into "vernacular splendor" (*splendore della lingua volgare*),

¹ The emphasis is mine. The repetition of the adjective "marvelous" denotes an atmosphere that the editor wanted to create among readers and listeners.

it also promised a story told in “artful and virtuous fashion,” or *virtuosi ingegni* (Cortés 1993, 77–78; my translations). With such a characterization, the original letter had been transformed into literature: “an utterance that must provoke the pleasure [*piacere grandissimo*] or the interest of hearers and readers [*cose degne di scienza, & admiration*], that is intended to last, and that is thereby more highly elaborated than everyday speech [*virtuosi ingegni*]² in modern poetics terms (Todorov xxi).

Whether or not Cortés’ narrative was elaborated enough to constitute literature seems questionable; in fact, the Italian readers of De Viano’s edition did not necessarily have to agree with him about his own characterization in order to consume his product as literature. Reception-based studies on the literary have considered not only the qualities found in texts, “but rather certain ways of acting towards texts” (Schmidt 1980 in Groeber and Schreier 1998) to detect literary attributes in books. Contrary to what critics of the “new paradigm” in Spanish Colonial Studies claimed over two decades ago, text production does not explain the nature of discourse synchronically. Only the study of book editions, without which discourse would have not existed in the first place, and the consideration of the roles played by editors and readers, can lead to a clearer image of early Spanish American narrative.

² The 1520s editor’s words are in italics.

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